# **Digital technology and virtual spaces: using social, cultural and economic capital to support emigration and orientation. A case study of Latvians moving to the UK.**

## Abstract

In this paper, there is an exploration of how 22 Latvian case study participants, who moved to West Yorkshire between 2007 – 2015, use digital networks to aid their migration journey and also to orientate to life in West Yorkshire. The empirical data supporting the argument here was gained through two tranches of in-depth qualitative interviews which were undertaken one year apart between 2019 and 2020.

The empirical findings have driven the evaluation process. This embodies what Grenfell (2012) argues to be the core of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which, as Grenfell states: ‘is essentially a theory of research practice’ (2012:213). However, theory and research are intrinsically linked. Therefore, a Bourdieusian sociological framework or paradigm has been employed to provide a frame for analysis. This paper therefore offers an analysis of a social situation as well as an evaluation of how a paradigm can be adapted to understand said situation.

### Key Words: Bourdieu, social media, capital, affordance

## Introduction

In the first section below, there is an analysis of how Bourdieu’s (1986) paradigm, which incorporates cultural, social and economic capital, the ‘pillars’ of Habitus, can be creatively applied to an analysis of the participants’ use of digital technology and social networks. Secondly, there is an overview of Alencar’s (2020) adaptation of Gibson’s (1979) concept of ‘affordance’, and this is applied to Bourdieu’s (1986) paradigm.

Thirdly, there is a discussion of the research process and lastly, there is an analysis of the empirical data in terms of the participants’ ability to migrate and settle vis-à-vis their use of digital technology. This paper provides a discussion of the participants’ use of informal, online social networks and how these enhance social, cultural and ultimately economic capital. This theme is developed to incorporate an important aspect of social networking for the participants, their ability to maintain informal social networks and to gain social capital through the use of online media, especially social media. Further, there is reference to how digital technology provides cultural and economic capital. The discussion below highlights how capital can vary depending on the participants’ access to digital technology and their ability to use it, again reflecting the importance of social, cultural and economic capital.

Migrants’ use of digital technology and how this enhances capital provides an interesting addition to the growing bank of knowledge that is predicated on the development of Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts. This development of Bourdieu’s concepts is exemplified by Keles’ (2015) consideration of the importance of internet use in developing social capital. Further, with a focus away from digital technology as a central theme, Gidengil and O'Neill’s (2005) use of Bourdieu’s capital to critically analyse gender and social capital, Wallace’s (2015) development of Bourdieu’s cultural capital to understand class and Black identities and Friedman and Laurison’s (2020) focus on embodied cultural capital, all demonstrate new ways to adapt Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of capital to contemporary situations. These studies demonstrate that Bourdieu’s capital paradigm can be applied to social change and here the adaption is made to understand the use of digital technologies by migrants.

The premise throughout this thesis is that to use Bourdieu’s concepts of capital in a critical manner, it is necessary to understand the interconnectivity of cultural, economic and social capital. As Bourdieu argues, capital is present in: ‘three fundamental guises’ (1986:243) cultural, economic and social capital, however, there is a profound interconnection between the three and Bourdieu (1986:249) further illustrates how the amount of social capital that a person can gain from their social network depends on the level of economic and cultural capital that others within the network possess.

Hence, Social networks, and the capital gained therein, are the centre of analysis and this paper rests on a consideration of empirical data from the research participants who describe their use of digital technology in the creation and maintenance of social networks on their migration journey and ultimate settling in West Yorkshire.

Building-on the empirical observations of the Latvian participants, it is argued here that physical networks were essential in the past to aid migration, however, because of the removal of temporal and spatial barriers as a result of digital technology, physical networks are explained by the participants as now carrying less significance. Physical, formal networks, such as community associations and groups, for example, Latvian Associations, are portrayed below by the participants as no longer supporting their needs. Latvian networks and physical spaces in West Yorkshire previously existed but now do not or exist to a lesser extent. Hence it can be argued that the past function of these organisations, to provide a place for social networking, is no longer as essential. However, this has not resulted in the loss of community and social networks as some theorists, such as Putman (1993) argue, but in a different kind of networking.

Accordingly, in this paper, there is a demonstration that for some migrants, physical networks have been replaced in prominence by digital communities. These digital communities are important in supplying and enriching social, cultural and economic capital. Contemporary advances in digital-technology mean that for the Latvian participants in this study, family and friends in their country and place of origin continue to be the most important social network in terms of social capital in the form of emotional succour.

## Developing the Bourdieusian paradigm to incorporate an understanding of digital technology and migrant digital capital.

Here there is a recognition of the importance of a social – digital approach to understanding the process of migration. Blended with this approach is the use of Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualisation of the modes of capital. This is achieved through extending Alencar’s (2020) use of social-digital-technology as capital. Alencar developed Gibson’s (1979) concept of ‘affordance’ which was initially constructed to provide a framework for understanding how animals interact with their environment. However, within the understanding of affordance theory, as described by Alencar (2020), digital technology is conceptualised as both functional and relational to human society. The digital device is understood as an object that has practical application but that also enhances meaning in terms of social relationships and networks. Digital technology can be argued to enhance personal agency, to build support networks, establish and re-establish friendships and family ties. A digital device is more than a tool and worth more than its practical application, it can represent social capital, provide emotional succour, support the maintenance of kinship and enhance personal competence. It is therefore important to understand the affordance that digital-technologies provide Latvian migrants as being blended with cultural, economic and social capital. The concept of ‘affordance’ is thus developed here to demonstrate how digital technology is perceived by the participants as enhancing their ability to: maintain social contacts; create new ones; enable education, develop skills; and to aid the finding of accommodation and jobs.

Alencar (2020) describes the social – technical perspective as an awareness of digital technology as it interfaces with people’s social situation. Here, by extending Alencar’s knowledge of the social-technical perspective there is a consideration of social-digital-technology as capital, in respect of its application and use by the case study participants in the migration process.

Building on the idea in Alencar’s (2020) study of affordance and digital technology, Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital are particularly relevant. In this study, it is evident that the Latvian participants’ ability to utilize digital technology was reflective of their acquisition of online knowledge and skill, therefore cultural capital. Further their ability to use English and online software to translate language depended on their digital knowledge and skill.

As Newell *et al* (2016), describe, research that interrogates the importance of digital technology and migration has become increasingly relevant with the growth in the availability of internet access for migrants. Digital technology is a crucial element in the migration process, aiding with the logistics of migration: person movement, the negotiating of transport from one area to another, and finding accommodation and work. Digital technology provides and enhances social capital, and this is exemplified by its essential role in finding support in the process of migration and in establishing and reinforcing networks. Furthermore, digital technology provides and reinforces cultural capital, supporting the acquisition of economic capital by aiding an understanding of new laws and regulations in destination countries.

## The Qualitative Research Approach

The research data for this paper was gathered via two tranches of in-depth interviews with 22 Latvian migrants who moved to the UK between 2007 and 2015. These participants currently live in West Yorkshire. The initial interviews were conducted between October 2019 and January 2020 in places conducive to the interview process. For this study with Latvian adults, cafes which could be accessed easily by the participants were chosen. As the author of this paper and the only researcher involved, I undertook the interviews.

The questions asked were actually ‘talking-themes’. Hence, instead of closed ended direct questions, the interview process was guided by areas which needed to be discussed to allow for consistency, but the participant led the discussion. There was a loose framework of questions, however, this was revised after the first interviews, consistency continued but the first interviews demonstrated that the participants wanted to expand on certain areas. The topic of this paper, which focuses on the participants use of social media, was actually one which arose from the interview process. The talking theme that was introduced was around ‘staying in contact’ with family and friends, and it became clear after the first interview that social media, and indeed, the use of digital technology in the migration process, were areas central to the participants’ experiences.

During the interviews, a recording device was used. Hence, instead of focusing on notetaking, it was possibly to engage in free flowing, natural conversation. This supported rapport and the generation of information highly pertinent to the participants’ migration journeys.

As mentioned above, there were two tranches of interviews. The second interviews took place using a Facebook page which had been established to support Facetime interviews. These second interviews had to be undertaken online due to COVID 19. These second interviews lasted approximately half an hour each, compared to the hour-long initial interviews. The second interviews were more focus and, although allowing for some elaboration, were used to provide increased insight into areas which the participants had touched on in the first interviews, but which needed further investigation. It is argued here, from the interviewer’s perspective that the second interviews online only worked well because of the initial rapport that had been developed in the first interviews.

**Discussion of the Empirical Data**

The empirical evidence demonstrates that in adapting to their new surroundings, participants relied on their development and use of social networks. These social networks enhanced their social capital; however, the nature of social networks was described as not always being in person or through an organisation. This section considers how the use of digital media technology can provide capital in the form of maintaining family and friendships over distance. Offering what Wilding *et al* (2020:639) argue to be the ‘widely recognised’ essential use of digital technology by migrants as, ‘essential to the maintenance of transnational families.’

Therefore, participants’ abilities to use social media and other aspects of digital technology greatly enhanced networking possibilities with family and friends in the UK, Latvia, and for those with particular technical knowledge and skills, across the globe.  Some participants had better access to digital technology because of their financial situation; however, for most of the Latvian migrants in this study, access to the internet was possible before and after migration to the UK. This access was mediated according to affordability. For instance, the Latvian participants in this study migrated to West Yorkshire between 2007 and 2015, with ownership of a mobile phone and internet use being circumscribed in the earlier years for financial reasons. Clearly, this reflects economic capital.

At the time of the interviews, the participants all had a degree of social, economic and cultural capital and were able to use digital technology as a tool in the migration process, including settling in the UK, for instance, as a way to maintain social networks in Latvia and to build new ones in the UK. However, for the older participants: Muttie, aged between 58 - 67, who arrived in the UK in 2008, Mirna aged 58 - 67 who arrived in the UK in 2010 and Eve aged 37 - 47, who arrived in 2009, the use of mobile phones with internet access was not initially available to them. This led to a resulting lack of cultural and social capital and they faced exploitation by the agencies that they used to find them employment and accommodation.

Mirna arrived in the UK with three other Latvian women who were also seeking work in the UK. Mirna paid an agency in Latvia then another in London. Once here in the UK, the woman running the agency bought her a ticket and told her to go and work for a leading budget hotel chain as a cleaner. Mirna spoke no English at that time and says that she was exploited:

I paid £500 to a man but I don’t even know why. People are still making a lot of money this way.

Mirna had limited ability to stay in communication with her daughters who were both in Latvia in 2010. Initially, she did not have a mobile device or access to the internet. Mirna was unable to find work for herself, or to access support from an online network of friends, family or Latvian Associations. She commented that she was at the mercy of the agency she paid to bring her to the UK, to find her accommodation and a place to work. As a result, she reportedly felt lost and paid money for services that she did not receive. Further, as she was employed via an agency, the hours that she had at the hotel had to fit with the employer and she had a zero-hour contract.

Mirna described how her painful memories of being forced to move to the UK for work still remain. Mirna’s reasons for migration are explained in more detail in the chapter: ‘Reasons for Emigration: Crisis’. Mirna explained how the 2008 recession and a divorce had left her on the verge of losing the family home that she had bought in Latvia. She had held-off moving to the UK for as long as possible, but eventually she stated that she had no alternative but to move.

Mirna told how being unable to see and communicate with her daughters was upsetting.  She said that she used to ‘cry and cry’ when she started working in the UK. When Mirna moved to the UK, she could speak Latvian and Russian, and it was only a small network of Russian speaking Polish cleaners who worked alongside her that gave her friendship and the social capital that she needed to feel she could carry-on. Within this group of friends there were people who had access to the Internet, and Mirna was able to contact her family in Latvia. This enhanced her social capital, further, through discussions with her Polish friends she gained the idea to change her job and seek employment as a care assistant, which provided a better income enabling her to purchase a computer and to access the internet. Through using her computer and practising her English with current colleagues, Mirna is now able to converse with patients at the nursing homes and hospital facilities she now works in. She says English: ‘Flows freely’. Further, Mirna can communicate online with her daughters, one of whom lives in the US and one who has remained in Latvia.

Eve did not know anyone when she came to England. She explained how she came by bus and with others who were recruited by the same Latvia employment agency. They were all told that they would have a job waiting for them, however, this was not the case. The Latvian company that recruited them and to whom they had paid, was supposed to contact other companies and to provide employment. However, Eve states:

They lied. When I came here, I didn’t have a job. Some people went back straight away, but I couldn’t as I’d borrowed money to come here. Thank god, some good people helped me, I didn’t know them, but these Latvian people helped me. It was so hard. Somehow, I made it, but it was so hard. My friend, who was in the same situation, and I thought about coming. But she couldn’t come, I came first, but there was no job. So, I told her that there was no job. After two weeks she did come. Together we went to the shop, a man heard us talking in Latvian and he said: ‘Okay I will give you a job.’ He got us a job in a greenhouse. He got us a National Insurance number, everything. It was still difficult as I didn’t know English. Thinking about it, it was crazy.

When Eve arrived in the UK, she was only able to use a mobile phone which did not have access to the Internet. Initially Eve was exploited, as she paid a fee to the Latvian agency that had recruited her, and they did not provide the job that was promised. She was fortunate to have a chance meeting with another Latvian who offered employment. The inability to access social media and other digital technology can therefore lead to a lack of social and cultural capital. Social capital, because it is not easy to communicate and to gain the support of friends and family who are in another country. Further, without digital technology it is more difficult to create new connections in the UK. Cultural capital is affected because it is not easy to access information and knowledge without digital technology. This put both Mirna and Eve at a disadvantage.

A demonstration of how social and cultural capital can be reduced as a result of a lack of digital technology, was provided by Oliver, who described a farm where all the Latvian workers were unable to speak English and had limited access to the internet. The farmer sent Oliver by bus to a nearby town with instructions on how to open a bank account, to enable his wages to be paid. Oliver did not experience abuse; however, it is clear that many migrants arriving for work in the UK will be in a vulnerable position if they cannot access the internet. Further, as Greco and Floridi (2004:75) argue, a lack of access to the internet creates a ‘digital divide’. This lack of ability to engage with the internet means that some people are disadvantaged in terms of accessing information, services and support. Greco and Floridi (ibid) suggest that the digital divide is not solely an issue that arises between developing and more developed countries, but can also arise within countries reflecting wider: ‘generational, geographical, socio-economic and cultural divides’ (2004:75), and can have a detrimental impact on opportunities for those more vulnerable.

Oliver gained a scholarship to study law at one of Latvia’s premier universities a university in Latvia. However, although he was promised a scholarship he had to leave when he discovered the stipend was for only one term. Although an excellent student with academic potential, he had to move to the UK in 2013 to find employment. Initially, he was reliant on a Latvian agency that found him work on a farm. During the first year in the UK, Oliver was joined by his mother and girlfriend, and together they bought a car, which provided mobility. He was able to use digital media to contact a Latvian friend, and the friend helped Oliver and his family to move to West Yorkshire and to find accommodation and work.

Oliver’s ability to now access and use digital technology has helped him to settle in West Yorkshire. Further, digital technology has afforded Oliver the opportunity to project-manage a house-build in Latvia, where he aims to live eventually. However, it was Oliver’s description of his and his partner’s use of digital technology to organise their wedding in Latvia, whilst living in West Yorkshire, that best exemplifies the importance of social media and digital commerce:

I got married in Latvia. We bought lots of things from eBay and took them to Latvia to decorate the wedding hall. We only spent £130 for all the wedding decorations in the hall. We decorated it ourselves and it only took half a day. It was a camping place and I had 70 guests. All guests stayed for a night. There were some rooms there. There were showers and beds, plus all the drinks were included: whiskey, champagne, vodka and wine. All that stuff and food for two days and music. All of this I paid £5000. That is for two days. Breakfast included. Food in the evenings as well stop this includes the church. This is why we decided we wanted to celebrate in Latvia, it’s much cheaper.

What could have been a logistical problem was eased by the use of social media. The guests were invited and checked-off via social media or by mobile phone. The ability to arrange a church, priest, ceremony; to source a reception venue, and to feed and accommodate seventy people for two days was only possible because of social media and digital commerce. Oliver’s story clearly exemplifies how cultural capital in the form of digital technology usage, can afford the user increased social and economic capital. Social capital in the form of being able to have a large, unifying ‘rite of passage’ event, and economic capital in the form of the ability to access e-commerce and to increase finances, or not to spend as much money.

The second interview with Oliver provided an opportunity for him to share his wedding photographs as a discussion point, as well as a video he had made of the Latvian countryside. This demonstrates how digital technology enhances experiences and reflection opportunities. Oliver explained how he was able to provide a copy of the digital wedding photographs to all of the wedding guests for free. This demonstrates how digital technology can reinforce experiences, social networking and social capital.

Muttie described the hard decision that she had to make to come to the UK. When she came, she brought her youngest daughter with her. She stated:

When I arrived, I had arranged to go and work on a farm, which I did for two months, they gave us a caravan to live in. After two months I managed to get a job in a card-making factory.

Muttie explained that when she was in the UK, she was initially unable to use the internet to find an employment agency that could help her search for a better-paid job. However, some other Latvians working on the farm with her helped her find a local job agency. They were there from college for their summer holidays; this was an important meeting as much of the farm work is seasonal and Muttie needed a long-term job. Muttie went with her daughter to the agency and registered and was offered a job in a card factory.

With the increase in income, Muttie was able to rent a one-bedroom flat for herself and her daughter and she was able to get a mobile phone and internet on a monthly contract from a large well-known grocery store. Muttie described how this was an important step, as she found it hard to be separated from one of her daughters in Latvia and other close family members.

Zav, has found being able to access information using digital technology has provided him with social networking opportunities as well as cultural and economic capital. He came to the UK in 2011 and is aged 26 – 36 and described how he uses the internet and social media to stay in contact with his family in Latvia:

I stay in contact with my family in Latvia. They’ve been here for holidays as well. I don’t go back so often. I like to save my money and go travelling with my friends. We’ve had some great holidays. I’ve been to Thailand and Australia. I could never afford to do that if I was living in Latvia. I feel like I am more connected to the rest of the world because I live here.

Zav described how he uses the internet to plan journeys and to communicate with his friends and family. He does not feel that he needs to see his family often as he can speak to them on social media. The majority of Zav’s immediate friendship group, which he has made in the UK, work in computer technology and most are Latvians. Further, because of the nature of their work, his friendship group is mobile, and some have moved from West Yorkshire to the South East and to other countries, however, he still remains in contact with them, and does not feel that distance is an issue. Zav has gained immense social, cultural and economic capital through the use of digital technology. He stated that he is not concerned about Brexit, because he earns, ‘well over’ the amount of annual income that the UK Government has stipulated as a minimum for migrant workers. Further, he explained that if he is not able to continue to work in the UK, he will just go to Germany and work there.

Art is aged 26 – 36 and arrived in West Yorkshire in 2013. Art has excellent cultural capital in terms of his education and experience in Information Technology. He worked in IT before accompanying his then girlfriend to West Yorkshire, where they both started degrees at a University. Art undertook a degree in Computer Science. He described how he did not realise that there were other Latvians living in West Yorkshire until he met one on his course. However, even given Art’s clear cultural capital: his first-class degree in Computer Science, whilst having to also find employment from the second year of his degree, Art explained:

I was taken advantage of for our rent, as when we came, we only booked three days accommodation, and had to find somewhere. We were charged £200 each to do checks on us.

This demonstrates that even with digital cultural capital at a high level, supported with access to the internet and the ability to use it well, it is difficult to negotiate new surroundings as a migrant.

Art does not use any Latvian Associations or clubs but uses social media to keep in contact with his friends and with his family, to whom he is close. Art’s mother came to West Yorkshire to work but returned to Latvia after a couple of months. The gap between cultural capital which is gained and used in Latvia, for instance, teaching qualifications and experience gained in Latvia and those qualifications gained in the UK is exemplified through a consideration of Art’s qualifications and his mother’s. Art’s mother has a Latvian teaching degree and years of experience, whilst Art has a BSc in computer science gained in the UK, with some experience in IT. Art is able to use his qualifications and experience in digital technology to live a middle-class life in the UK, whilst his mother has to work in a factory when she works in the UK, her qualification are recognised in Latvia, but not in the UK:

My mother came to Britain to make some money and stayed just for a couple of months. She is a teacher and could only get factory work.

This demonstrates that qualifications and experience gained in Latvia do not equate to cultural capital in the UK, unless, as in the case of Art and Zav above, the skills are particularly easy to transfer and desired, such as those in computer technology and these are enhanced by HE qualifications gained in the UK. Being able to use digital technology well and to use the internet and social media expertly; all represent cultural capital. Therefore, it is not qualifications and experience per se, which creates the capital that supports the Latvian participants. It is the ability to access and use digital technology and the internet which supports the participants’ ability to settle in the UK.

Art stated that:

I think that I am living in a bit of a ‘white collar’ bubble. I know other Latvians who have experienced some harsh things, but I am okay. I have settled in well here; when I was with my girlfriend, we had a nice flat and two cats. Now I am thinking about moving to Singapore and working in IT there. I have an interview there in January. In the meantime, I am going to Bangkok next week for a month, to get a feel for the place.

Art is aware of his current cultural capital, and the social capital that he gains from networking with his friends online and the bubble he describes consists of fellow Latvians who work in IT. He explained how he has formed his own small network of middle-class Latvian IT professionals:

Since moving to the UK my main hobbies have been travelling. I never wanted to do this much when I live in Latvia, but now I do it with my friends.

In Latvia Art could not afford to travel. Art uses social media to remain in contact with his parents and he is in close contact with his brother and sister who both moved to West Yorkshire just after Art. Art described how working in computer technology has provided him with social, cultural and economic capital, in terms of friendships, work satisfaction, personnel skill development and financial reward. It is his use of, and career in, digital technology that has afforded him this lifestyle. As Art explained,

 If I moved to Singapore and then decided to move back to Europe, I would choose the UK over Latvia. Only my parents remain in Latvia, and I am happy seeing them occasionally, for a visit. The lifestyle here, for me, is a ‘white collar’ experience, I know that for some other Latvians that they have higher qualifications than their job and they have a worse experience. I like the way I am treated with respect at work.

It is therefore Art’s perception that his ‘white collar’ job in West Yorkshire affords him a lifestyle and benefits that other Latvians do not enjoy. He is sure that this is due to his UK qualifications, skill and experience in computer technology. Having a degree from Latvia does not equate to a graduate style of employment in the UK. Similarly, Bourdieu’s (1996) description of the benefits of elitist education in France, focuses on how prestige is garnered through the experience at the elite school or university, and how this in turn provides embodied as well as cultural capital. Therefore, cultural capital in the form of recognition and the respect of others and how this translates into personal confidence and dispositions is not reflective of the quality of education, but of others perception of that education.

Sab, a female participant aged 17-25 who arrived in West Yorkshire in 2016, uses an online platform to gain comfort, social capital and emotional succour. She described her regular online interactions with her mother in Latvia:

Calling with video it’s like being here. I was cooking and making salad and talking to my mum on the computer. I can sit in the kitchen and drink coffee and be on the computer talking to my mum.

This demonstrates that it is possible to retain communication links with family in Latvia through the use of social media sites. Furthermore, carrying-on daily tasks whilst chatting is a normal activity for Sab and her mother, which they had managed to recreate online. Sab explained that she is close to her mother and the use of an online platform to see each other made her feel less homesick. This regular contact provides Sab with emotional warmth, retaining what Sab describes as ‘closeness’ with her mother and the social capital that is gained from this. It was important for the participants to maintain relationships in Latvia through the use of social media. These relationships fill a gap that other organisations, such as the Latvian Association, had traditionally satisfied.

This role that physical institutions in West Yorkshire, such as Latvian clubs, Saturday schools, activities and churches, played in the past was described by the participants as no longer as necessary. One participant, Roman, who arrived in West Yorkshire in 2008, because he was unable to finance college due to the financial crisis, and now aged 26 – 36, stated:

We don’t go to Latvian Club; it is not for young people. We are too busy with family and work.

Roman described how he had used digital technology to search for courses and to study online. He had saved and paid over £4,000 to take his Heavy Goods Vehicle driving licence in the UK. He had also researched how to get a mortgage and was buying a three-bedroom house. Roman used digital technology to further enhance his education by studying English online. His main social life was online with his siblings in West Yorkshire or in Latvia, and if he had time to meet other Latvians in West Yorkshire, this was arranged online. Mobile phone technology provided an essential link for Roman to be able to communicate with his wife and children when he had to complete driving jobs over several days.

The only person in the study who used the Latvian Club regularly was Eve. She used the club to put-on dance displays with her Zumba class and also attended traditional events, such as the Christmas Fair. Eve is aged 37 - 47 and has only one close family member in Latvia. She has established her life in West Yorkshire, attending a church regularly, running a business and participating in Latvian social events.

Social media and digital technology were demonstrated by the participants to provide a platform for community that they could not find elsewhere. Contemporary needs were not met by established clubs and societies. In terms of migrant network building, Keles (2015) argues that there has been too much focus on physical places, public and private, and not enough on virtual spaces. Further, the Internet is argued by Baldassar (2016:153) as providing a ‘virtual co-presence’ over formats such as video, telephone, Skype, Facebook or Twitter. Skill and aptitude in being able to use social media can therefore be argued to be a cultural capital of resistance and sustenance which links with a social capital of online networks.

One participant, Ada, aged 26-36 arrived in West Yorkshire in 2012 with a small child. She described how she uses a Latvian online mothers’ group, a version of the UK ‘Mums’ Net’ organisation. Here she talks to other mothers about children’s health matters. Ada described how the group was ideal for her, as the other women often shared similar experiences and she could explain her needs in Latvian.  Ada also used e-commerce to buy specialist Latvian food and other items such as Lavazza coffee, which she uses in her home coffee machine. Shopping is another area that Ada discusses with her online mothers’ group.

Aiva, is aged 26 – 36 and arrived in West Yorkshire in 2011. She uses the internet to socialise on Facebook and to stay connected to her friends who are working in other EU countries. Aiva values digital technology as a tool for enhancing her English language skills, as well a way to stay in contact with others. As she stated:

Back in the day, you know, there wasn’t really any access to the internet, so I remember, like, I would…. Even when I was a kid, I would like American music, not Latvian music. I would get these magazines about American music and they would come with lyrics to songs, and I would go through them with the old dictionary, and I would look up every single word that I didn’t already know. ‘Cause I had to know what it meant. And I would look-up and just check it out and that’s how I learned as well, so, I don’t know, from movies you know. I don’t watch any movies that have voice-overs or anything like that, just English. I don’t even want to hear anything like that, with voice-overs or even subtitles. For me, I don’t know, I like to learn, especially now as I live in England. You have to speak English.

Digital technology was described as offering opportunities to continue studying, to seek work and travel as well as supporting the retention of established relationships and developing new ones. Further, digital technology provides a medium for entertainment. Just as Aiva enjoys watching films in English, Janis, a man aged 26 – 36 who arrived in the UK in 2009 stated:

I like watching Netflix, films in English, not with any subtitles.

The use of digital technology, especially internet TV was common, Rait, a man aged 26 – 36, who arrived in the UK in 2014 stated:

I learned English from the computer and from films. Watching with subtitles.

Liene, aged 26 – 36 arrived in the UK in 2008. She quickly settled and focused on reconstructing her life after experiencing abuse in Latvia. This is discussed in more depth in the chapter: ‘Reasons for emigration: Crisis’. Most of Liene’s family have moved to West Yorkshire, and since settling in West Yorkshire Liene has had a child. Liene stated:

I stay in contact with people in Latvia, we don’t speak often, I don’t have a lot of family. My grandmother is there.

The use of digital technology for Liene has focused on gaining educational qualifications. She has gained her GCSEs in Maths and English since arriving in the UK and explained how using the internet to check her work was important. Further, Liene has attended college, gaining a qualification in personal training and is employed by two gyms. Finding these jobs via an online search.

Social media became increasingly more important for Liene during the first COVID-19 lock-down in 2021 as she was unable to work, and gyms were closed. Liene described how she posted short, ‘street work-out’ films on social media platforms, to inspire others to use everyday items to work-out within the spaces available to them.  This demonstrates how digital technology continues to grow in importance and how placing the lens on a group of migrants demonstrates the complex structure of reliance upon it. The affordance that digital-technology can offer in terms of ability to gain cultural capital in the form of qualifications, skills and access to information is accentuated when focusing on migrants for whom English is a second language and who do not have a social network in place in their destination country.

## Conclusion

The findings of the case study are contrary to Putman’s (2000) argument that internet use will result in fewer opportunities for socialisation in the form of community reliance and support, and in less social networking. Indeed, there are not fewer opportunities to socialise, but different ones. Putman (2000) argues that internet use will result in reduced social capital, however this paper demonstrates that digital technologies, and especially social media, play an important part in some migrants’ ability to maintain relationships across borders.

The empirical data discussed in this paper demonstrates that social networking and the gaining of social capital via the use of digital technology, can in effect further cultural and economic capital. However, some participants acquired more from digital technology than others. The discussion above illustrated how some Latvian migrants were at a comparative disadvantage to others who had better access to digital technology, and further, how others whose careers are in digital technology have attained economic and cultural capital, as well as creating new communities and friendships on social media.

In the discussion above, there is a consideration of how the digital divide is argued by Greco and Floridi (2004) to be problematic for some. Whilst digital technology can be advantageous, providing cultural, social and economic capital; shortening and even erasing distance; it also be problematic. For instance, the decrease in the use of cultural centres, Saturday schools and churches has left few physical spaces for Latvians in West Yorkshire; arguably, this has resulted in widening gaps between those with digital capital and those without, or as Greco and Floridi, state: ‘generational, geographical, socio-economic and cultural divides’ (2004:75).

A lack of ability to access digital resources therefore results in reduced access to social and cultural capital and a consequential reduction in the ability to gain economic capital. For participants who arrived in the UK without access to mobile technology, there was the experience of economic exploitation, this was exacerbated by a lack of English language ability. In terms of generational differences, those who arrived with no English language skill were in the 37 – 47 and the 58 – 67 age groups. The cultural capital that they had gained through completing degrees in Latvia did not equate to cultural capital in the UK. Their experience of crisis in Latvia extended beyond the 2008 recession to the days of Soviet occupation; however, none of these participants wanted to stay in the UK.

The reduced use of physical places has removed some associations and groups and reduced the availability of others, such as with one Latvian Club in West Yorkshire. This means that those without the cultural and economic capital to be able to use the internet effectively are disadvantaged. They lack information regarding regulations and laws, which could place them in danger or mean that they are vulnerable to abuse. Arguably, any immigrant to the UK needs to access knowledge about the new environment into which they are settling, to be unable to find information and support, because it no longer exists in the physical sense, leads to the potential for exploitation. However, the lack of internet access can exacerbate differences that already exist, as there will be those who are information-rich and those who are information-poor, with a lesser possibility of gaining support because of the event of the internet.

Overall, however, it can be concluded that digital technology affords the participants the ability to invest in social networks and to develop and extend these networks, therefore, to grow their social capital. Further, it provides them with opportunities to progress cultural capital and to enhance economic capital. Although Latvian tradition, culture and ‘being Latvian’ was described as important by all of the participants, they socialised outside of the Latvian Club, largely with other Latvians and did not participate in organised Latvian activities and social media is used extensively to arrange meetings. Their main connection to Latvia, apart from Latvian friends, were online networks.

Further, it is feasible that the internet can provide an extra space for physical support networks, such as Latvian Clubs and Churches, to reach out to migrants who might need them. However, it is only those migrants who are able to access digital networks that can take advantage of any such developments.

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